‡ PAIN TOURS (I) ‡

La Plata Perdida

This is how you visit the silver mines of Potosí, the highest city in the world: First take an airplane to El Alto, where some people's hearts collapse under the altitude as soon as they step off the plane. El Alto is at 4,061 meters. Potosí is higher. You take a bus to Ororu, and another one from there. You might share your seat with an animal. You might see a movie starring Jean-Claude Van Damme. These are popular on overnights: Van Damme fighting terrorists, killing bad guys, speaking the mouth-awkward language of another dubbed tongue.

When you get off the bus, Potosí will look like other Bolivian towns—old women roasting ears of corn over open flames, sidewalks full of skinny dogs and broken appliances—until it looks different: the pastel walls around its central plaza, the elegant balconies, the stately courtyards. Maybe you think it's beautiful. Maybe you think it's too much, too colonial, a little gauche. Maybe later, the memory of these buildings will make you feel a bit sick in the heart.

People come to Potosí to see the famous silver mines of Cerro Rico, so you will see them too. Take a tour. Smile politely when the man behind the desk tells you that the miners will get a cut of the money. Tell him, in your beseeching Spanish, that this is very nice. Put on your gear: boots and overalls, a bandanna over your mouth. Take a van to the miners' market. Here, you will find severed goats' heads sharing tables with Che Guevara ski caps. *¡Viva la Revolución!* There are shiny white skins, unfurled, that are the long stripped interiors of animals' intestines.

But you are here to buy presents for the underground men: bright sodas whose flavors are colors instead of fruits; sticks of dynamite; coca leaves in small blue bags. These are gifts for the miners but really, of course, they are gifts for the givers: you will *give something back*, as they say, and this pleases you. You will cover your subterranean tracks.

Listen carefully to your guide, Favio, an angry man your own age. He is barely twenty-five but he has three brothers in the mines and two young sons who will work here too, someday, unless he can pay their way out. Then he smiles slightly and says, *"but you did not come to hear about my life,"* and you did, of course, always greedy for other people's lives, but first you must listen to the rest because listening is a gift too, or this is what you tell yourself: the tentative idea that this knowing can make a difference.

So *¡oye!* Listen up. They call Cerro Rico the mountain that eats men because it already has, six million so far. Potosí *conquistadores* got rich on its silver and they built all kinds of pretty courtyards in town. But six million, my God. You glance sheepishly at your gifts: your lucky dynamite, your grape soda.

The mountain is full of mouths but you only visit one: a dark hole on a hillside littered with crusty old jeans, long discarded, dirty beer bottles and toilet paper, small mounds of human excrement. Here, you are told, is where the miners eat and drink and shit between back-to-back twelve-hour shifts. *Oh, yes; yes, of course.*

You find the mineshaft bearable at first, a cool dark hallway, until it absolutely isn't: two-ton trolleys barreling down thin infrastructure, steep tunnels full of foul dust, all of them snaking toward the center of an unbelievable heat. Sometimes you have to kneel. Sometimes you have to crawl. Sometimes you pass miners, cheeks bulged with mounds of half-chewed coca, and someone gives them bottles of soda while the guide asks: "How are you?"

Favio gives you the scoop on President Evo. Everybody thought he'd make it better but then he didn't. Evo calls the miners his brothers but still keeps raising their taxes. There have been strikes.

There have always been strikes. Things are "under discussion" in La Paz. You nod. You know there must be questions worth asking but what you ask is: "How much longer until we get to level three?" You are having a little trouble breathing. Your bandanna is gummed with gray dust.

In level three, at the end of the ventilation tubes, you see two men standing at the bottom of a dark hole. "Let me tell you how we get through the day," Favio says. "We miners, we are always telling jokes. These men were probably telling jokes just before we came." They have been underground for five hours and they've got another seven left. Do they want some dynamite, as a gift? They do.

On the way out, you pass the statue of a demon. He is called *Tío*. The Uncle-Devil. He's got a cigarette in his mouth, a beer in his hand. The miners are mainly Catholic but down here they worship the devil. Who else could possibly hold sway? They worship until they are thirty-five, or maybe forty, and then they die. They die from accidents or silicosis, a disease one calls "the uniting of dust in the lungs." They leave their sons behind to work a mountain with a little less silver than the one their fathers worked, and their fathers before them.

At the exit, there is sunlight and clean air. This is something. But you catch sight of yourself in the darkened glass of your minivan—your cheeks black, neck black, lips black—and the truth is you look like a devil too.

Sublime, Revised

The warning, as ever, is also a promise: *This program contains subject matter and language that may be disturbing to some viewers.* It's a promise the same way an ambulance is a promise, or a scar, or a freeway clogged around an accident.

The show is called *Intervention*, and each episode is named for its addict: Jimbo, Cassie, Benny, Jenna. Danielle lines up twelve prescription bottles on the coffee table while her eight-year-old says,

"I know real mommy is just waiting to come out." Sonia and Julia are anorexic twins who follow each other around the house so that one won't burn more calories than the other. Everyone has a wound: Gloria drinks because of her breast cancer. Danielle takes her mother's Percocet because her father is a drunk. Marci drinks because she lost custody of her kids because she drinks.

Andrea is twenty-nine. She hasn't lived with her husband and children for nine months. She spends her days drinking rum carefully rationed by her mother. She takes a drink and tells her mother, "This one is because you never got me counseling." She keeps a bottle of Captain Morgan in one hand and a liter of Pepsi in the other. She has bruises all over her body from where she's tripped over chairs, fallen into door frames, landed on the floor. Excessive bruising can be a sign of compromised liver function, the show tells us. We are given scientists' eyes. We can see the purpling damage for ourselves.

The camera work is an experiment in turning monotony into something interesting. The fatigue and stamina of addiction are kept electric by compression: time-lapse shots of a bottle's sinking line of whiskey; a cancerous pile of empties in the corner; a timeline of photos that ticks off stations of the cross, sinner to martyr to corpse: smiling baby gives way to pockmarked meth ghoul gives way to sullen mug shot.

Sober Andrea talks about her responsibilities. Drunk Andrea talks about her afflictions. She toasts the twin nodes of trauma that constitute her life: an absent alcoholic father and a rape at fourteen. When she is drunk, she doesn't believe she can do anything but hurt.

The structure of the show implicitly endorses her narrative of victimhood. It needs a story to tell, after all, and she's fashioned one—a story patterned by the saving, satisfying grace of cause-and-effect: get raped, get silenced, get abandoned, get drunk. The television program needs a genealogy for her dysfunction. Getting drunk is more interesting when it can be read as a ledger of traumas rather than their source. Recovering alcoholics sometimes talk about feeling like they never got the Life Instruction Manual everyone else got. Here's a substitute set of imperatives: lose a job, get drunk; lose a child, get drunker. Lose everything. Andrea has. So get sober. Maybe she will.

The father of her children, Jason, barely greets her when she comes to visit the kids each month. She still calls him the love of her life. He says, "What's up?" and keeps cooking lunch. He declines to be interviewed by the program. He doesn't participate in the intervention. He's given up. He's not crying on the other side of the bathroom door, or yanking the bottle from her hands. He's just gone.

We're not gone, though, we viewers. We stay with Andrea after she tells her children good-bye. We see her get drunk, again. We see why it might have been hard for Jason to stay.

The shows takes care to emphasize, over and over again, that the participants have agreed to be on a reality TV show about addiction but don't know they will face an intervention. Given that the biggest reality TV show about addiction in America today is *Intervention*, this is a bit difficult to believe. But the point is, people want to believe it. They want to know something the addict doesn't. They want the intervention to be climactic, surprising, and powerful. They want to be in on it. *Don't throw your life away, Andrea,* they'd say, if they were in the room. *I think you can make it.*

In his theory of the sublime, eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke proposes the notion of "negative pain": the idea that a feeling of fear—paired with a sense of safety, and the ability to look away—can produce a feeling of delight. One woman can sit on her couch with a glass of Chardonnay and watch another woman drink away her life. The TV is a portal that brings the horror close, and a screen that keeps it at bay—revising Burke's sublime into a sublime voyeurism, no longer awe at the terrors of nature but fascination at the depths of human frailty.

The professionals who moderate the show's interventions are called "Interventionists," a title that seems better suited to a blockbuster film about the Apocalypse. I imagine a slick troop of heroes, clad in black, giving an ultimatum to the world about its addiction to

capitalism or oil. These Interventionists are mild-mannered grandparents dressed in business casual. They almost always stress the singularity of the intervention—"You will never get another chance like this," they say. They mean what they hope: this moment will divide the addict's life into a cleanly spliced Before and After.

It's true, of course: the addict will probably never get another intervention like this—which is to say, on reality TV—but this is precisely the difference between the addict and his audience. For the regular viewer, the once-in-a-lifetime intervention happens every Monday night at nine. The unrepeatable is repeated. Every week is a relapse, the viewer thrown back into addiction after last week's vow to stay clean. Epiphany is succeeded by another intoxication. A grown woman throws up on her mother's couch once more. A needle jams into the same junked vein. Disturbance is promised, recorded, dissolved—then resurrected, so it can be healed again.

Indigenous to the Hood

Start the Gang Tour at a Silverlake building called the Dream Center, where grown adults cluster around the bus like kids on a field trip. Pay sixty-five dollars and take a complimentary bottled water. Notice the church group from Missouri, twenty-strong and blond, and eye their grocery bag full of snacks: Teddy Grahams, Pringles, Cheetos. Notice the surprising number of Australians. They pace restlessly. One of them is named Tiny, but he isn't. He appears to be here with his son, a teenager in baggy shorts and braces.

Alfred is the tour's founder and guide. He's a marine turned gangbanger turned entrepreneur. He's cracking Inner City Jokes. His phrase. Like: "We don't need the windows open cuz we don't do drive-bys." Also, we can't have them open because the bus is air-conditioned. Alfred has hired three other guys to help lead the tour—ex-gang members who had trouble finding other jobs with felonies on their records. They've turned their experiences into stories for travelers. They are curators and exhibits at once. When they're not giving tours, they're doing conflict mediation in the

communities these tours put on display. Your sixty-five dollars will fund this work.

Your friend the screenwriter arrives bearing a half-drunk chai that disappointed him. He compliments your tactful yellow dress, neither Crips blue nor Bloods red, and you remember elementary school field trips downtown. You and your fellow Westsiders were given careful instructions about gang hues. Your subconscious still follows them. The Missouri group leader is a buzz-cut guy whom Alfred affectionately calls Pastor. "Where's Pastor?" he says, when he's talking about something Pastor might be interested in.

On board the bus, the jokes continue—"In the event of an emergency, you'll find bulletproof vests under your seats"—but the scenery changes. Silverlake bungalows give way to the warehouses of downtown and the signage of a hybrid city—papuserías and pho shops, Spanglish enticements: *Thrift Store y Café.* 1-800-72-DADDY promises dads it can get them custody or at least visitation rights.

Each guide stands at the front of the bus to tell his story. One guy, let's call him Capricorn, points out the projects where his first girlfriend still lives. "Still won't take my calls," he says. Another guy lays down statistics: every felony, every sentence, every prison, how much coke he got busted for each time. One guy describes a brutal turf war on the first day of junior high, when the kids from three different elementary schools—each one loyal to a different gang—were all jammed together for the first time. They started clapping at each other until the police came. You think clapping is a kind of hand signal. You learn it's not. You learn boys get their first guns when they're eleven or twelve.

You hear notes of something like nostalgia when these guys talk about their former lives—the weapons and arrests, the monstrous tallies of their cash flows. Pride comes before the fall and also after it. But the nostalgia is tangled up with a deep and genuine lamenting of the terms of this territory—how harshly it circumscribes the path, how inevitably it punishes alternatives. Things are different now, though. These men got out of prison and wanted another

way. When Alfred says, "I'm a spiritual man," you see him looking around to see if Pastor's listening. His reform is operative on all fronts. He'll tell you about his struggle for a bigger vocabulary: "I learned 'gentrification' in solitary"; "I practice pronouncing 'recidivism' in the shower." He calls Capricorn's life story "an indigenous tale from the hood."

Scholar Graham Huggan defines "exoticism" as an experience that "posits the lure of difference while protecting its practitioners from close involvement." You're in the hood but you aren't—it rolls by your windows, a perfect panorama of itself. *We don't do drive-bys.* You just drive by.

You pass the old LA County jail, which is surprisingly beautiful. It's got a handsome stone facade and stately columns. The new LA County jail—called the Twin Towers—isn't beautiful at all; it's a stucco panopticon the color of sick flesh. Alfred gets on the mic to talk about his time in there: ten guys in a cell designed for six, extra men moved to closets and kitchens whenever inspection teams rolled through. He talks about the rats. He calls them Freeway Freddies. It was an ecosystem in there, and out here too: you see an entire neighborhood selling bail bonds. You see Abba Bail Bonds and Jimmie Dright Jr. Bail Bonds and Big Dog a.k.a. *I'm still tough* Bail Bonds, and Aladdin a.k.a. *I need my [illegible] third wish* Bail Bonds. Bail bond shops remind you that every guy serving time has a mother and every mother probably has a story of that time she went to the bail bond strip mall and had no idea which bail bond shop to choose.

From downtown, you head to South Central and finally to Watts. The towers are eerie and wondrous, like something a witch made, pointing ragged into a blue sky. Capricorn tells you he's climbed them. Most kids in Watts have climbed them. A lot of guys get them tattooed on their backs or biceps—the distinctive profile of their bony cones. One of the Missouri girls asks, "What're they made of?" and Capricorn says, "What does it look like they're made of?"

You like this kind of tour, where there is such a thing as a stupid question, though this—to you—doesn't seem like one. What *are* they made of? Capricorn finally mutters, "Shells and shit." He's right, you find out later. They're made of shells, steel, mortar, glass, and pottery. An immigrant named Simon Rodia made Italian folk art the template for generations of gang tats.

Capricorn tells you he chose his name before he knew his zodiac sign. It happened to work out. He gets a call from a guy named Puppet but doesn't take it. He says, "I can't deal with that right now." He tells you he still believes his phone is tapped—by whom, he doesn't say—so he changes phones nearly every week, gives the old ones to his nieces and nephews. Your screenwriter friend says, "So now your nieces' and nephews' phones are tapped?" Capricorn doesn't laugh. Your friend tells him you grew up here, in Santa Monica, and you feel ashamed because you know Santa Monica isn't here at all.

The *here* of Watts is pastel houses with window gratings in curly patterns. *Here* is yard sales with bins full of stuffed animals and used water guns. Here is Crips turf. "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country," writes Susan Sontag, "is a quintessential modern experience." Part of what feels strange about this tour is that you're assuming the posture of a tourist—*How many people have died here? How do the boys come of age?*—but you are only eighteen miles from where you grew up.

Alfred says more people have died in LA gang conflicts than the Troubles in Ireland. You'd never thought of it like that, which is his point: no one thinks of it like that. These blocks look so ordinary. South Central Avenue itself is just a gritty bracelet of strip malls and auto body shops; Watts is parched lawns that once burned. The here of Watts was on fire in 1965. Black boys who hadn't gotten into the Boy Scouts were sick of it. They made their own clubs. Thirty-five thousand people rose up. People got sick of it again in 1992, when Rodney King was beaten and thousands of people, the children of the Watts riots, said *enough.* Reginald Denny with a brick to the head said *enough.*

You try to remember what you thought about Rodney King when you were young, but you can't. Is that possible? You can't. You

were nine years old. You can remember, faintly, that some part of you got stubborn about the police—*but they only would've hit him if he did something wrong.* You still wanted to believe in uniforms and a system of order that had always served you well. You remember OJ Simpson better than King. OJ Simpson's wife was killed in Brentwood, where you went to school.

Rodney King was swarmed and then he was beaten. He suffered fifty-six baton blows. Two officers broke his face with their feet. Where were you back then? You were a kid. You were on the coast. Other kids had to be kids farther east, where people got angry at the corner of Florence and Normandie and stayed angry at the corner of Florence and Normandie, stayed angry at Koon and Powell and the paleness of Ventura County, and for days the fires wouldn't stop.

Your refrigerated bus crosses the concrete spine of the LA River, icon and encapsulation of the city's wasteland shame. The gray banks are covered with patches of lighter gray where paint has been layered over graffiti. Alfred points out a long stretch of painted riverbank—three stories high, and three-quarters of a mile long—where the world's biggest tag used to be. It read MTA: Metro Transit Assassins. It was visible from Google Space. Now the grayness is like a sprawling tombstone—another scar in a battle between two different structures of authority, two civic institutions trying to claim the same space.

Alfred delivers a lesson on graffiti taxonomy: the difference between tag and flare and roller, between a masterpiece and a throw-up. A masterpiece has more than three colors. A throw-up usually means bubble letters but sounds more like some boy vomited the colors from his mouth. On a downtown wall, you see a painted face vomiting rainbows. Across the street, you see what looks like a polar bear illuminated by sunset. "Look at that throw-up," you tell your screenwriter friend. "Masterpiece," he corrects, pointing out five colors. You realize that three-story MTA would've been a masterpiece too. You learn that every graffiti act in the state of California is a felony. You learn that painted hot-chick skulls are

called Sugar Skulls. You learn that three dots tattooed under the eye means *la vida loca*, as in: *I plan to keep living the.* You think those dots look like tears suspended against gravity. You don't know whether they signal commitment or renunciation or something in between. Tiny's teenage son asks Alfred, eager: "Were you much of a tagger?" He asks Capricorn if his family still lives in Watts, and—if so—if we'll get to see them on the tour.

The outing ends under a sultry Sugar Skull. You all pose for "gang shots" in front of a huge mural that says *Big Los Angeles* in bright blue bubble letters. Or maybe you don't pose, because you feel uncomfortable. But the Aussie guys are psyched for it, flashing their hand signs and sporting tough-guy pouts. One girl from Missouri gets some backseat posing advice from her friends—"Look tough!"—but [illegible] she can't stop grinning. Pastor poses with the bus driver, who's taken off his shirt to show an inked-up chest that has one rose for every year spent in prison. There's not much bare skin left.

This photo shoot feels like an odd capstone. You've come to understand gang violence as symptomatic of an abiding civil conflict whose proportions we can only begin to fathom; now you watch church kids fumble their fingers toward *Eastside*, toward *Killaz*. Maybe Pastor will change his Facebook profile to a shot of himself and Capricorn gripping palm-to-palm. "Photographs objectify," Sontag writes, "they turn an event or person into something that can be possessed." Now Pastor owns a small corner of the hood—or perhaps, more to the point, he owns a moment of his own experience. He can pack up his own heightened awareness like a souvenir. His opened eyes are take-home talismans. You want the tour to give you back another version of yourself, you and everyone: a more enlightened human.

You imagine the sermon in Branson the next Sunday, Capricorn and Alfred like ghosts of glorious reform behind the pulpit. Maybe Pastor will say, *These men turned a 180 you wouldn't believe.* Maybe his congregation will break the silence with their clapping.

You'd clap for that sermon, actually. These men were raised into

violence—raised *by* it, like a parent—and now they live another way. Is it possible to say—in the most full-hearted and deeply earnest sense, uncluttered by disclaimers—that this tour is impossible to look away from and important to remember?

You feel uncomfortable. Your discomfort is the point. Friction rises from an asymmetry this tour makes plain: the material of your diverting morning is the material of other people's lives, and their deaths. The unease of the tour is not the discomfort of being problematically present—South Central mediated by air-conditioning vents—so much as the discomfort of an abiding absence—a pattern of always being elsewhere, far away, our of ear- and eye- and gunshot, humming beach to bistro along the Pacific Coast Highway.

What good is this tour except that it offers an afterward? You're just a tourist inside someone else's suffering until you can't get it out of your head; until you take it home with you—across a freeway, or a country, or an ocean. No bail to post: everything lingers. Puppet lingers. Those clapping seventh graders linger. Your own embarrassment lingers. Maybe moral outrage is just the culmination of an insoluble lingering. So prepare yourself to live in it for a while. Hydrate for the ride. The great shame of your privilege is a hot blush the whole time. The truth of this place is infinite and irreducible, and self-reflexive anguish might feel like the only thing you can offer in return. It might be hard to hear anything above the clattering machinery of your guilt. Try to listen anyway.

THE IMMORTAL ‡ HORIZON ‡

On the western edge of Frozen Head State Park, just before dawn, a man in a rust-brown trench coat blows a giant conch shell. Runners stir in their tents. They fill their water pouches. They tape their blisters. They eat thousand-calorie breakfasts: Pop-Tarts and candy bars and geriatric energy drinks. Some of them pray. Others ready their fanny packs. The man in the trench coat sits in an ergonomic lawn chair beside a famous yellow gate, holding a single cigarette. He calls the two-minute warning.

The runners gather in front of him, stretching. They are about to travel a hundred miles through the wilderness—if they are strong and lucky enough to make it that far, which they probably aren't. They wait anxiously. We, the watchers, wait anxiously. Pale light bleeds faintly across the sky. Next to me, a skinny girl holds a skinny dog. She has come all the way from Iowa to watch her father disappear into this gray dawn.

All eyes are on the man in the trench coat. At precisely 7:12, he rises from his lawn chair and lights his cigarette. Once the tip glows red, the race known as the Barkley Marathons has begun.

The first race was a prison break. On June 11, 1977, James Earl Ray, the man who shot Martin Luther King Jr., escaped from Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary and fled across the briar-bearded hills of northern Tennessee. Fifty-one-and-a-half hours later he was found. He'd gone about two kilometers. Some might hear this and wonder how he managed to squander his escape. One man heard this and thought: *I need to see that terrain!*

Twenty years later, that man, the man in the trench coat—Gary